



Pathways to Participation

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON PRA

1

DEFYING DEFINITION – A DIVERSITY OF MEANINGS AND PRACTICES

The label 'PRA', originally for 'Participatory Rural Appraisal', has come to capture a range of different practices and interpretations of what participation is about or for. With the popularisation of PRA as a way of 'doing participation' and growing concerns about quality, these differences are increasingly important to understand.

THE TREMENDOUS popularity of PRA over the last decade has created a situation in which – as a Kenyan practitioner complained – 'everyone is doing something and calling it

"PRA"'. For many, PRA is associated with the use of visualisation methods, such as maps and matrices, for analysis by and with participants. But for some, 'doing PRA' is less about using particular methods than an approach to development that calls for different ways of relating. As one NGO worker put it, 'everything we do is PRA'. Others talk of PRA as a 'way of life'.

Practitioners and advocates of PRA emphasise 'attitudes and behaviour', broadening the principles of equality, humility and respect that underpin PRA to every dimension of development work. Yet many are quick to point out the departure from these ideals of much of

Contents

1	Defying Definition – a diversity of meanings and practices	1
2	Rapid Spread through Many Pathways	4
3	Making a Difference	6
4	Concerns over Quality – the elusive nature of 'Good Practice'	8
5	Critical Reflection for Learning and Change	10
	The Pathways to Participation Project	12

What is PRA? *Perspectives on PRA vary enormously...*

NEPAL

'We need a baseline to monitor or assess the effects of the project... We tried to introduce PRA because it is very fast, very informative, and works case to case...'

'I think if you have produced, if you have come up with the sort of action implemented, then your PRA is good... If you have done nothing except writing a report, that PRA is... I mean that's PRA but we are not looking for that kind of PRA.'

'The true spirit of PRA, for me... is a tool of the marginalised. And I am using it from that sense, a tool of the poor...'

'PRA is a way of life...'

KENYA

'PRA is as diverse in the way it is adopted as the cultures we have.'

'PRA is anything that will enhance more people to get involved, and will allow more people to give their ideas'.

'It seems like PRA is a thing you do to communities, rather than something about participation'.

'What people call PRA they change to suit. Donors come and ask for services we can't cope with'.

page 2 ►►

what is done in the name of 'PRA'. Some draw attention to the commodification of PRA, others to its use as a routinised ritual, or even as a legitimating device to lend moral authenticity to decisions made elsewhere.

PRA came into being as a challenge to the assumptions and practices of what Chambers called 'normal professionalism'. Yet for its advocates, as for its critics, the potentials and pitfalls of PRA are thought about very differently. What different kinds of people think PRA is or should be is informed not only by their professional backgrounds, but also by their personal and political values. For some, PRA challenges conventional research practice. For others it is simply a set of methods that can be used alongside focus groups or surveys.

Many development workers associate the use of



What is PRA? / continued from page 1

MEXICO

'[PRA] can generate space and time for communication in the community. It allows for the construction of bridges – between those subjects involved who participate in projects, between communities and state institutions.'

'It is a very directed participation with the issues already decided. It's only varnish.'

'[PRA] is good for getting information from the communities, but not for solving their problems. We continue being just a laboratory.'

'It raises a lot of expectations, but then leaves people without the tools to fight for what they want.'

FROM THE PATHWAYS INTERNATIONAL RETREAT

'PRA is used to increase the acceptability of projects to local people... and to meet donor requirements.'

'It's hoodwinking – governments have done PRA and think they have got people's participation. [People] lose whatever little rights they had.'

'PRA facilitates people to understand their unique value in their society. They get angry and demand from politicians.'

'PRA – Public Relations Appraisal!'

SOURCES:

Garett Pratt, 2001, 'Practitioners' critical reflections on PRA and participation in Nepal', *IDS Working Paper 122*, Brighton: IDS

Andrea Cornwall, Samuel Musyoki and Garett Pratt, 2001, 'In search of a new impetus: practitioners' reflections on PRA and participation in Kenya', *IDS Working Paper 131*, Brighton: IDS

Xavier Moya and Sally-Anne Way, forthcoming, 'Winning spaces: participatory methodologies in rural processes in Mexico', forthcoming *IDS Working Paper*, Pathways to Participation Series.

Garett Pratt and Andrea Cornwall (eds.), 2000, 'Pathways to participation international retreat: a retreat for critical reflection on PRA', Brighton: IDS

PRA with the project cycle. But some regard the project mentality as a constraint to participation. PRA is often used to produce information to inform decisions taken elsewhere, by professionals or policy makers. Yet others see it as inherently tied to community-led action, and as a tool for mobilisation and for popular involvement in decision-making processes.

People's understandings of PRA also depend on the cultural and political context, and on the previous history of participatory work in the places where they work. PRA is commonly presented as a southern innovation. But for some it is associated with northern development agencies, and compared negatively with indigenous participatory practices. In some contexts, such as Nepal, the meanings and practices associated with PRA are imbued with local moral and spiritual values. In others, such as China, the dominance of particular research traditions means that PRA is seen simply as a practical tool for planning projects rather than a way of doing 'research'. These different ways of thinking about PRA are tied to other strands in the history of how PRA has spread, and different ways of thinking about development.



One Organisation – Many Versions of PRA

Tim Holmes studied the way that fieldworkers in ActionAid The Gambia (AATG) understand and use PRA. They receive the same guidance and policy messages. They are under the same organisational pressures, facing similar workloads, deadlines, and budgetary cycles. They also face similar social pressures as they negotiate relationships with people in the communities where they work. Yet they interpret PRA in different ways. Some think it should be done every six months, others say every five years. Some think it should take one day, while others say ten. Some think communities should be divided into subgroups for PRA, while others think the 'whole community' should meet together. Few use PRA tools for subsequent updates to community action plans. As Holmes argues, individual field agents take the initiative to do PRA and their other duties in ways that make sense to them, given their background, personal objectives, and understanding of their role. As much as managers try to impart one idea of how to do PRA 'correctly', each fieldworker will interpret and practise it in their own way.

Source: Tim Holmes, 2001, 'A participatory approach in practice: understanding fieldworkers' use of PRA in ActionAid The Gambia', *IDS Working Paper 123*, Brighton: IDS



2

RAPID SPREAD THROUGH



PRA grew out of experimental practice, challenging conventions. Advocates sought to foster creativity and innovation, resisting formulation. Trainers, practitioners and organisations adapted PRA to different purposes and contexts. As method, approach, attitude and commodity, PRA has spread far and fast, taking multiple forms.

Developed by academics and NGOs in the late 1980s, PRA rapidly gained popularity in the early 1990s. Many PRA pioneers refused to set down rules and methods in manuals, encouraging the mood of innovation out of which the approach was born. The maxim ‘use your own best judgement’ gave licence to creatively explore what PRA might offer, generating new and unforeseen possibilities. This gave rise to a diversity of emphases and practices – and to different ideas as to what ‘doing it properly’ might involve.

PRA spread far and fast precisely because it spoke to a diversity of development actors, promising them things they felt development lacked. For those frustrated with time-consuming surveys, it promised speed. Speaking to a desire for greater efficiency and effectiveness and about empowerment, it met the concerns of those charged with putting into practice policy commitments

to participation and those who were disaffected by the ethics and values of mainstream development work. PRA offered the possibility of closing the gap between policies and people’s realities.

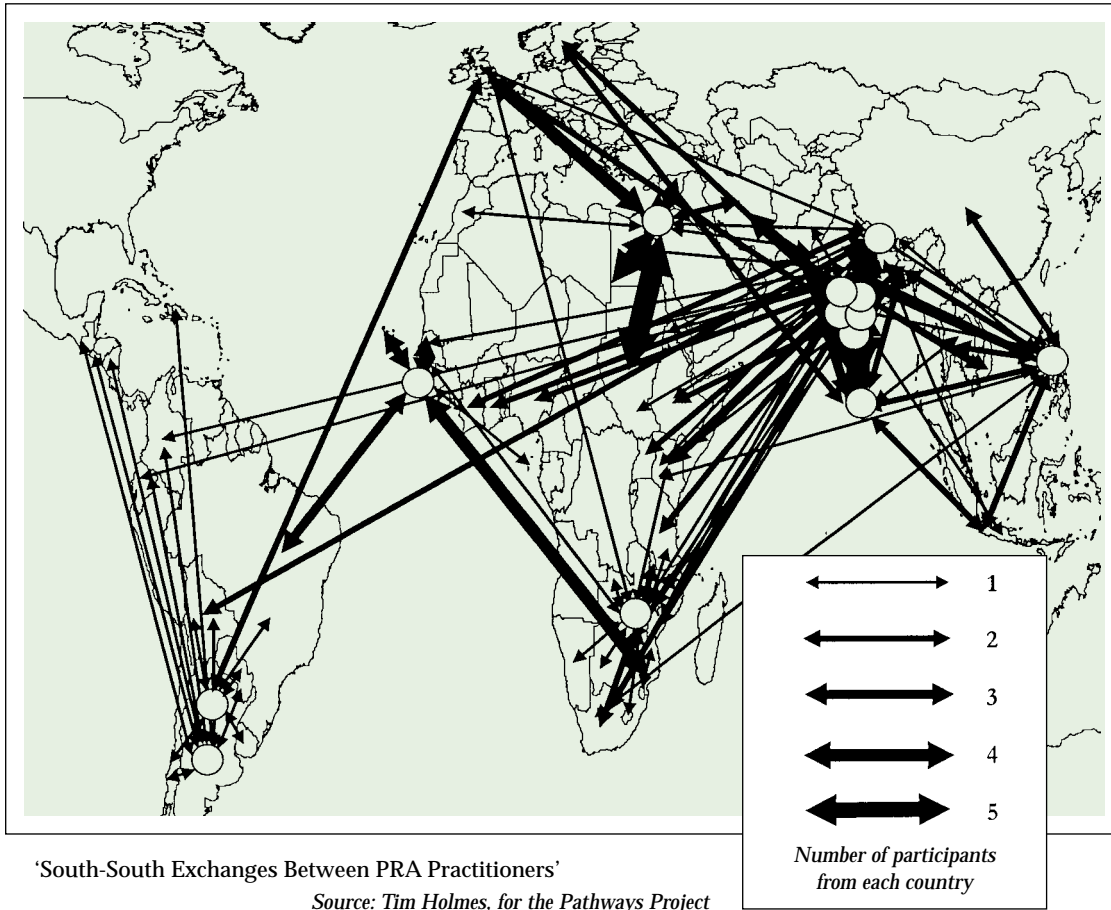
PRA’s spread was supported by an ethos of sharing and innovation, and by the assurance that ‘everyone can do it’. Those exposed to PRA in any form felt able to go out and try, train others and develop their own versions. Versions spread and were adapted by organisations to suit a variety of purposes, creating hybrids and new practices. PRA pioneers had an enormous impact on understandings of PRA, travelling the globe conducting training. Ideas and experiences flowed within and between southern countries, through networks and exchanges. Written materials – photocopied reports and reflections, newsletters, journals, books – provided information and inspiration, shaping practice.

Reflecting on the global spread of PRA

Kamal Singh reflects on the global spread of PRA and on factors that enabled it to spread so rapidly. One was the personal excitement and learning generated by the use of PRA methods. Another was the important role played by a first generation of ‘champions’ and trainers and their contribution to supporting a second generation. He also argues that the

space made for continuing innovation made it possible for many people to be pioneering in their own right as they picked up PRA and made it their own. National and international networking, and flows of information about PRA worked together to put people in contact with new ideas and practices, and with each other. Open-ended support from powerful

MANY PATHWAYS



'South-South Exchanges Between PRA Practitioners'
Source: Tim Holmes, for the Pathways Project

The popularisation of PRA has created a vast body of practitioners, trainers, consultants and 'PRA experts', with different messages about PRA. People have used PRA in questionnaires and for conscientisation, in natural resource management and to address domestic violence, from Switzerland to Somalia.

Spread across sectors, applications, political and social contexts and along diffuse pathways, versions of PRA become ever more difficult to disentangle from the tremendous diversity of the individuals and organisations who call what they do 'PRA'.



global actors allowed decentralised, loose global networking. He ends on a cautionary note. The financial rewards and 'culture of consultancy' that have come with PRA's popularity may undermine continued sharing and learning. As PRA is used more widely, there is a risk that the underlying values will erode. He suggests that continued critical

reflection may be one way forward.

Source: Kamal Singh, 'Handing over the stick: the global spread of participatory approaches to development', in Michael Edwards and John Gaventa, eds., *Global Citizen Action*, Boulder: Lynne Reiner, 2001

Pakistan PRA Mapping Project

Over the last three years, the Cavish Foundation has been mapping the use of PRA by organisations and individuals in parts of Pakistan. A questionnaire survey of development organisations and individuals explored definitions of PRA, strengths and weaknesses experienced in applying the methods, and opportunities and threats to PRA in the future. Results have been compiled into a directory. Follow-up interviews with selected organisations provided further information and workshops brought together many of the respondents to discuss the findings and to think about how weaknesses and threats could be addressed in the future. The project filled a combination of purposes, creating a directory for those seeking human resources, enabling practitioners to engage in self-reflection and dialogue with others, and raising awareness of issues around the quality of PRA practice.

Source: Cavish Development Foundation, 2001, 'PRA Mapping in North-West Frontier Province'.

3

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

There are calls for evidence of the impact of PRA on development. Multiple versions and diverse practices make assessing impact problematic. Much depends on who uses it and how – and on the other approaches and activities that accompany its use. PRA is no magic bullet. Yet the principles informing PRA have had an impact on development practice, in areas that conventional impact assessments often obscure.

What difference has PRA made to the lives of poor and marginalised people? PRA is understood and practised in so many ways, it is hard to generalise about its effects. And it is equally difficult to establish how to assess the influence it has had – measuring ‘empowerment’, for example, has challenged development practitioners for years. Perhaps most problematic of all is isolating ‘the PRA factor’ from the complex influences on any development outcome.

This is not, however, to underplay the effects that PRA has had on development practice. Even forms of PRA practice criticised for departing from participatory ideals often involve people doing things differently – listening, giving people a chance to speak for themselves, building new alliances or working relationships.

Simply assessing impact in conventional ways would miss stories of change in which the use of PRA led to entirely different kinds of projects than originally anticipated, in which people successfully asserted their own visions of development and in which project or programme staff began to relate differently to people.

PRA has put local people into new roles where their knowledge is valued, as PRA facilitators and trainers, as ‘experts’ with knowledge to share with professionals. Many development workers say that they have undergone personal change through experience of PRA, rethinking their own roles as development professionals. As organisations have adopted PRA, questions about internal management have been raised; some have introduced participatory practices into decision-making processes,

Making changes through PRA

A study by Kimanzi Muthengi, Melanie Speight and Christine Kilalo explains the changes that have happened as the NGO World Neighbors has applied PRA in a Kenyan community. The story illustrates the way that PRA is practised in particular circumstances and is entangled in complex processes of social change. PRA is only a small part of World Neighbors’ ongoing interactions with the communities where they work, alongside extension activities, organisation building, and liaison with government officials.

A new committee has been formed to lead community development efforts, expanding the participation of poor people and women in community decision making. PRA has been used to help the committee create a general analysis of their community, as well as to hold workshops on specific issues, like gender relations. Members of the committee express their newfound sense of themselves as citizens who ‘know our rights’. The local government officers have developed a commitment to supporting local development

plans, although they have trouble finding funds from a cash-strapped government to help. Communities have increased their confidence and ability to seek resources from external agencies to support their plans, although few agencies are able to respond with small grants for such community-based proposals. World Neighbors still face challenges. For example, they realised through the study that while women’s participation has increased by using PRA to do planning within the expanded



staff selection and review, and selecting partner organisations.

PRA has served as a rallying point for building new relationships. At the local level, some frontline staff speak of improvements to their relationships with local people since using PRA. Regional and national networks to discuss PRA and participation have forged new connections between NGO staff, government officials, consultants, and researchers, internationally as well as locally. More broadly, the popularisation of PRA as a practical way of putting participatory ideals into practice has helped to secure agreement on the importance of participation in development. Even if 'participation' often stops with 'a PRA', this has helped open space for people to rethink what development should be about or for.



committee, youth still feel they are left aside from decision making, and as a result there are no specific activities addressing their perceived needs.

Source: Kimanzi Muthengi, Melanie Speight and Christine Kilalo, 2001, 'World Neighbors' Experience of Going Beyond PRA in Kenya', *IDS Working Paper 132*, Brighton: IDS.

The side-effects of PRA

Emma Jones and SPEECH document how participating in PRA can change the way people behave in other situations. When SPEECH practises PRA, they create a temporary social space with its own norms or 'rules' for proper behaviour that are different from those governing everyday social spaces. These 'rules' include, for example, that women should speak as equals to men in these spaces, and that any views expressed should be considered on their own merit. The experience of these new norms has led some women to question the way they are expected to behave in other spaces. Families who share this new experience have started to allow girls more freedom than before. Some women feel free to interact differently in the social spaces they share, such as the place they gather to do their washing in the mornings,

joking and discussing community issues.

The staff of SPEECH would not attribute these changes only to using PRA. They see PRA as only one small part of their work in communities, alongside processes of community organising, challenging existing hierarchies, conflict resolution, and consciousness raising, all of which contribute to gradual social change.

Source: Emma Jones and SPEECH, 2001, "Of other spaces": situating participatory practices: a case study from South India', *IDS Working Paper 137*, Brighton: IDS



4

CONCERNS OVER QUALITY – THE P



The popularisation of PRA has given rise to concerns about quality. Reports of ‘abuses’ abound. Yet opinion remains divided about what can be done. As the meaning of PRA is contested, so is the meaning of ‘good practice’ – multiple understandings reflect different objectives and institutional, political and personal values. All this makes arriving at consensus on what constitutes ‘good quality’ PRA difficult. And even if practitioners agree on ideals of ‘good practice’, they may be difficult to apply in real-life situations.

One reason PRA became popular was that people were invited to take what they wanted from it and shape it in their own ways. It could be applied by anyone, to just about anything. The proliferation of ideas about PRA has inevitably led to concerns about quality. Competing visions give rise to multiple – at times conflicting – criteria for assessing what is ‘good’ and what is not. What is criticised as ‘mechanical’ by some is ‘systematic’ for others; popular slogans like ‘use your own best judgement’ may be

seen by some as licence to pass off anything as ‘PRA’, and by others as encouraging creativity and innovation.

Not only do people have different ideas about what ‘good practice’ might be, they also differ over purposes, ethics and values. For example, some believe ‘good PRA’ should produce community consensus over priorities and actions. For others, ‘good PRA’ should help those who are marginalised to strengthen their position, even if conflict results. Some argue for taking any opportunity to do PRA as

a way of bringing about small changes; others are wary of co-option and the use of PRA as a legitimating device. As PRA has come to be used by large, powerful institutions, concerns about the politics of participation have come to the fore.

Amidst different perspectives, purposes and applications, it is difficult to arrive at a single version of ‘good practice’. If it were possible, it would be difficult to put into practice in many real-life situations in which PRA is used, where compromises always have to be made. Not only may people need to accommodate ‘bad practice’ to get anything done, what seem to be the worst kinds of practice may have positive outcomes. Yet as concerns over quality have continued to grow, practitioners clearly feel that something needs to be done.



Criteria to improve participation in programmes and projects in Mexico

Workshop discussions led a group of Mexican practitioners to develop indicators for evaluating the implementation of participatory methodologies.

In the short term, indicators to look for include:

- Previous knowledge of local problems and conflicts
- Networks and local groups identified before applying PRA

- Community project or plan constructed by participants
- Opening up of the agenda or interests of the external agent
- Participants being clear on the economic, political, and social contextual problems

In the medium term, the impacts of participatory interventions should include:

- More cohesion and strengthening of the community/locality

- Networks, formal and informal groups (co-operatives, unions, savings societies, neighbourhood committees, etc.) strengthened
- More social participation and control in local organisations and projects
- Training or strengthening local democratic leadership
- Negotiation skills provided or improved for local actors
- Improved quality of life according to local criteria
- Improved local technical skills
- More integrated development proposals



Kenyan guidelines for good practice

Participants in a workshop in Mombasa produced draft guidelines for good participatory development practice, in training and facilitation, scaling up participatory community development projects, and participatory policy making. The following is a summary of some points from the draft guidelines:

Before the inception of any programme/project, the implementing agency should provide enough information to all the stakeholders about its operations to enable them to participate effectively. They should also invest in understanding existing practices for community decision making, as well as local knowledge dissemination systems. There should be a clear partnership agreement drawn up between communities and external organisations. Organisations should have a strategy for feedback mechanisms, so that information can be passed in both directions between them and the people involved in their activities.

Facilitators are more effective if they are open and able to adjust their facilitation plans according to the situation, and to the demands from the group. When facilitating training or any community process, there should be ongoing monitoring so that the group has a chance to monitor its own processes and progress. Facilitators should change or adjust without losing sight of the objective of the training,

Organisations should be conscious for whom they are documenting the process. They can find different media for documentation that suits each audience. It might be in the form of the narrative reports, videos, posters and brief reports etc. The process as well as the findings of participatory processes will be a source of learning for others.

Trainers and facilitators should look for chances to build the skills of others, training in-house trainers for organisations, and apprenticing ex-trainees in future work.

The group plans to further discuss the guidelines with more practitioners, policy makers, community representatives, and the private sector, to build more debate around how participatory development should be done.

Abuse or Accommodation?

A donor agency hires a consultancy firm to do a 'PRA' in an area that covers seven villages to fill their requirement that people have been consulted prior to the implementation of a water project. The funding available will cover five days of the time of two people, including the production of a report. This is non-negotiable.

The consultants contact local leaders in each of the villages, and request them to send people to a meeting to talk about a possible water project the following week. By mid-morning on the appointed day, a large crowd has assembled. They are divided into groups, by age and gender. Each is given flipcharts and pens, and instructed in how to complete a different visual diagramming exercise. After completing the pictures, they are held up and explained to the crowd. There is a brief discussion. People depart for home by the early afternoon. The flipcharts are collected. A report is produced, one that looks like any other PRA report. The donor is delighted: water emerges as the top priority in every case. The project is given the go-ahead.

This example would seem to capture the hallmarks of 'bad' practice. It was rushed. It is unclear who spoke for whom. It was guided by pre-determined outcomes. It involved neither iterative analysis nor any attempt to follow up on issues that people had raised that weren't related to water. What are we to make of it?

The consultants might have turned back the contract – but in this context, there would be others who would take it, on whatever terms. They might have tried to get the donor to commit to follow-up on other issues – but the money for the water project was coming from a particular budget-line, which had been committed, and opening negotiations on other projects would be lengthy and uncertain. They might have spent several weeks in the area, engaging with a wider range of people – but this would have used up a lot of people's time, for an outcome which might not have looked that different. They might have done their own follow-up work with local organisations – but they would have remained unpaid and unsupported by institutions that could help fund a longer-term process.

Unethical practice or a pragmatic solution to a difficult situation?

5

CRITICAL REFLECTION FOR



Mechanisms for quality control – setting standards, agreeing codes of practice, regulating services in PRA – sit uneasily with the way in which PRA was promoted and spread. And PRA has spread so far and wide it would be virtually impossible, in any case, to try to regulate its practice. But those who commission, promote and use PRA can act to improve the quality of participatory practice. While no single mechanism offers a definitive solution, all offer entry points that organisations, networks and training institutes can use to improve the integrity and depth of their work with PRA. Making a difference to quality calls for a range of strategies, amongst which critical reflection is particularly important.

Addressing concerns about quality has become increasingly difficult as PRA has spread. Burgeoning numbers of consultants now offer PRA as part of their portfolios. Manuals, web resources and courses offer recipes for practice. Networks struggle to keep track of the sheer volume of people who now lay claim to being ‘PRA practitioners’. Donor and lender requirements for stakeholder participation translate into ‘doing PRA’ – to inform policies, as well as projects. Mainstreaming efforts have led to PRA being taken up and institutionalised in organisational contexts

where budget frames, time schedules and procedures condition what kind of ‘participation’ is possible.

In this marketplace of possibilities, what are the prospects for improving quality? Networks may exert peer pressure on their members, but cannot reach those who decide not to join. Trainers offering quick results may undercut those who insist on lengthy, field-based, training courses. Consultants may refuse contracts, but there are always others who are willing to accept. Organisations might commission ‘a PRA’ because it is expected, but lack

Reflecting on PRA in Mexico

A steering committee of Mexican participatory development practitioners worked with IDS to analyse the story of PRA in their own context. A consultant conducted wide ranging interviews with participatory development practitioners about the past, present, and future of PRA. The range of views was reported back to practitioners in two regional workshops and a national workshop, where there was further debate on the criticisms raised, and people’s ideas for moving ahead. The steering committee then decided to explore different aspects of participatory development practice through detailed case studies. Xavier Moya, Claudia Paz and Teresa Miyar documented the Peninsular Participatory Development Project in Yucatan, which achieved, ‘a high degree of participation, but the proposal was still owned by the NGOs. This confirms some of the limitations intrinsic to PRA’.

Gabriela Guzman studied the Sustainable Productive Development Programme in Marginalised Areas of Guasteca, Veracruz, an attempt to use PRA in a large scale government

programme funded by the World Bank. Despite four years of sustained effort, ‘the community councils and project committee did not have their own life; rather they depended completely upon programme interventions to be able to function...’ The limited success that there has been in generating community initiatives through PRA processes is threatened by government imposing their timing and political and administrative priorities over the needs of communities.

A three-person team from Group of Environmental Studies (GEA) studied a participatory process in a coastal town in the Santa Clara Gulf, a heterogeneous, isolated, and conflict ridden fishing community where the drug trade also thrives. The case raises questions about applying ideas of participation in such a difficult context. The practitioners also mapped the projects in which PRA has been applied, and posted the maps on the internet. The overview and case study documents are being published in Mexico, both in print and on CD-Rom, and in English translation by IDS.

LEARNING AND CHANGE

commitment to following through.

Practitioners identify a number of entry points for change. For many, the problem and the solution lie as much in the hands of the agencies that fund and commission 'PRAs' as in those of practitioners. Tools like checklists – of what to take into account, of non-negotiables, or even what to watch out for when hiring 'PRA consultants' – are suggested by some as a way to guide good practice. Encouraging development agencies to introduce minimum standards, either independently or through negotiation across organisations, is another strategy that many favour.

To address dilemmas of quality amongst the diversity of those who practise PRA, many call for greater opportunity for interchange, learning and critical reflection – whether through workshops, exchanging written reflections, or making space for regular feedback sessions within organisations. Some call for the development of codes of conduct to which practitioners would sign up. Others emphasise the difficulties of arriving at consensus, and argue instead for more critical debate.

What all of these ideas about improving quality come down to is the importance of creating spaces for critical reflection and deliberation – amongst donors, NGOs, government agencies, consultants or trainers. These spaces can offer rare and important opportunities for people to air views they might otherwise keep quiet, share their concerns and dilemmas, listen to others' opinions and experiences, imagine alternatives, celebrate diversity and agree to disagree. Whether or not such discussions generate a product such as a code of conduct or a set of guidelines for practice, the *process* of coming together to build shared – if not common – understanding can create new alliances, and provide the basis for developing strategies that can make a difference.



Deliberating on the quality of PRA practice in Kenya

IDS researchers worked with the Participatory Methodologies Forum for Kenya to interview many participatory development practitioners about the past, present, and future of PRA. A brainstorming session with a small group of network members generated many creative ideas about ways to continue the debate over the quality of PRA practice. The views of practitioners were presented in a draft report, which was circulated back to everyone interviewed. A steering committee was convened to take forward some of the ideas recorded in the initial report.

After long discussions over how to take the many ideas forward, PAMFORK organised a workshop to discuss guidelines for good participatory development practice. Over twenty people from NGOs,

campaign groups, consultancy organisations, universities, and government attended. The group did not draw only on PRA practitioners, but included people practising many other forms of participatory development. Representatives from bilateral donors made contributions about past and current efforts to institutionalise participation in specific programmes. The participants generated a draft list of guidelines.

The committee plans to have further discussions about the guidelines with regional nodes of the network. They also plan to have further dialogue with policy makers, practitioners, and the private sector about different social actors' roles in making their vision of good practice into reality.

Writing for reflection in Nepal

Nepalese PRA practitioners have a strong history of sharing experience through formal networks, where debate and self-criticism is encouraged. Practitioners gathered for two 'writeshops' in order to write their experiences into case studies to be shared with others. In the first workshop, the authors first made oral presentations of their case studies, and received comments and questions from their peers. With individual assistance of professional editors, they refined their case studies during the workshop. In the second workshop, organised exclusively for women practitioners, the two short

residential segments of the course were broken with time for women to work on their writing individually.

The workshops, original writing, and publication were in Nepali, but the collection will also be translated into English for international distribution. NEPAN's co-ordinator, Chet Nath Kanel, said, 'Now we are very much convinced that the "write-shop" method is really an interesting, fruitful and participatory method of writing something that is very much related to people's concern. I am also convinced that NEPAN should continue this sort of "writing workshop" once a year.'

Sharing Reflections on PRA in China

The Yunnan PRA Network supported a process of reflection for PRA practitioners in Southwestern China. A small group of practitioners began by producing some guidelines for individual reflection, suggesting topics to think about. Individuals and groups within organisations were invited to reflect on these questions on their own. Provincial workshops were then convened for people to share and deepen their analysis, in Sichuan, and Guizhou. A final meeting brought together representatives from those provinces with members of the Yunnan network.

Many practitioners reflected on the conflict of roles they experience as employees of research institutes engaged in PRA. Their PRA work is not usually recognised by their own institutes. PRA work has become an important source of income for practitioners, which has raised some competition and conflict, and for some, tensions between being practitioners with their own principles versus service providers. Practitioners also reflected on the way they have learned about PRA over time. They recognise the value of belonging to a network and sharing experiences. They are struggling with the challenges of training people in PRA in the

Chinese context, in which people have a very set idea of teaching and learning. Some teach about PRA in a didactic style, while others blend the lecture method with less conventional participatory styles of learning.

They told stories of positive impacts in sectors as diverse as managing tea plantations, changing the pedagogical style in biology classes at the university level, and selecting beneficiaries for a credit programme. Practitioners are beginning to think beyond PRA, to finding ways of involving villagers in designing institutional mechanisms for managing natural resources and development projects. But they also reflected on the constraints of PRA. They have concerns about the cost of PRA processes, the cultural appropriateness of PRA given the history of governance in China, the institutional constraints under which they work, and the pressures on practitioners to act 'unethically' in order to reap financial gain.

Following the series of workshops, practitioners designed small research projects through which they have explored themes that they felt were worthy of more study, which have now been published as a collection.



The Pathways to Participation Project

This briefing is based on the *Pathways to Participation* project, a collaborative research initiative initiated by the Participation Group at IDS in early 1999 to take stock of experience with PRA ten years after it first began to gain popularity in development practice.

The *Pathways* project has worked with PRA practitioners and development organisations in Kenya, Mexico, Nepal, India, The Gambia and Vietnam, supported associated work in Pakistan and China, and convened international practitioners of PRA to reflect on their perspectives on the past, present and future of PRA. Activities have included overviews of practitioners' reflections on the current status of PRA in particular countries, reflection workshops, an innovative 'write-shop' with practitioners, case study research,

networking activities, video making, and practitioner exchanges.



The *Pathways to Participation* Project was funded by Sida, the UK Department for International Development, and the Swiss Development Co-operation. This briefing draws on the *Pathways to Participation* working papers series and other Pathways outputs, many of which can be downloaded free from our website (www.ids.ac.uk/particip/research/pathways.html). This briefing was written by Andrea Cornwall and Garrett Pratt, who would like to thank Robert Chambers, Jethro Pettit, Isabel Vogel and Andrew Corbett for their advice and help. Photographs by Garrett Pratt and Sammy Musyoki.

FOR MORE DETAILS

For more details contact:

The Participation Group
Institute of Development Studies
University of Sussex
Brighton BN1 9RE UK

Phone: +44 (0) 1273 606261
Fax: +44 (0) 1273 621202
Email: participation@ids.ac.uk
Web: www.ids.ac.uk/particip

